

# California Democrats Back Incumbent's Rival

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## Body

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LOS ANGELES -- The first rebuke to Senator Dianne Feinstein came in February, when the California Democratic Party delivered 54 percent of its convention vote to her opponent, Kevin de León, a state senator -- just short of the 60 percent he needed for the party's endorsement.

Then, in the California Senate primary last month, Ms. Feinstein crushed Mr. de León in her bid for a sixth term, drawing 2.9 million votes compared to 804,000 votes for him.

But on Saturday night, the executive committee of the Democratic Party struck again at Ms. Feinstein, embarrassing her by voting to endorse Mr. de León in spite of the primary result. He received 217 votes from the committee of party leaders and elected delegates, or 65 percent of the 333 votes cast.

The result is the latest sign of impatience by liberal Democratic activists across the nation with the kind of moderation Ms. Feinstein represents in Washington, D.C. -- and in the state that has become viewed as the vanguard of Democratic resistance to President Trump. The jolt to Ms. Feinstein is also a reminder of what has long been a current of discontent in some quarters with her, particularly among younger Democrats, some of whom suggest it is time for her to retire. She is 85.

"Kevin de León represents the future of the Democratic Party -- a solidly progressive legislator who can see that things like Medicare for all and moving forward on climate justice are the things that really energize our base in the long run," said Daraka Larimore-Hall, 44, a Santa Barbara community college professor and a member of the executive committee who voted for Mr. de León.

The vote means that Mr. de León's name will appear on millions of pamphlets that the Democratic Party will mail to its voters this fall. He will also appear in the state's official voting guide as the Democratic Party candidate for Senate, which could make a difference for so-called low-information voters not following the race as they seek to decide whom to support.

However, in a year when Democrats are battling to capture as many as seven Republican-held congressional seats in California -- a key part of the party's national strategy to win the House -- officials said it was highly unlikely the party would spend any money on Mr. de León's behalf, since both candidates in the November contest are Democrats. No Republican candidate is on the Senate ballot because Ms. Feinstein and Mr. de León prevailed in the state's "top two" open primary last month.

And Ms. Feinstein goes into the general election with huge advantages over Mr. de León.

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She is a California institution, who has consistently raised more funds than Mr. de León, and by big margins. She has the support of some of the most influential national Democrats in the nation: former President Barack Obama, Gov. Jerry Brown and Senator Kamala Harris among them.

By many indications, the executive committee of the California Democratic Party is also not reflective of the electorate at large. Mr. de León, the former leader of the State Senate, lost to Ms. Feinstein in every county in the state in the June primary; he even lost his home Senate district in Los Angeles. A U.S.C. Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll in June showed Ms. Feinstein leading Mr. de León by 36 percent to 18 percent among registered voters, though nearly 50 percent said they were undecided.

Robert Shrum, the director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California, said the vote means "close to nothing" as a measure of support for Ms. Feinstein or of the changing politics of the Democratic Party.

"This is not a grass-roots uprising -- but a testimony to de León's political skills," he said in an email.

Still, the vote represented a needed boost for Mr. de León, who had been struggling to gain attention since his poor showing in the primary.

In an interview on Sunday, Mr. de León said the validation that comes with being the party's official nominee would upend the trajectory of a race that many Democrats considered all but settled after the June vote. He noted that the June primary involved 32 candidates, and that he was barely known among voters -- a weakness he said the Democratic Party's endorsement will change as he heads into a head-to-head contest with Ms. Feinstein.

"Our goal was always to get into the top two," Mr. de León said. "And now we are there and have an opportunity to contrast our accomplishments, our values and our vision."

Ms. Feinstein declined a request for an interview.

Mr. de León's victory was the latest of several triumphs for liberals in Democratic primary elections this year. Most notably, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York community organizer, scored a stunning upset over Representative Joseph Crowley, a Democratic Party leader and 19-year incumbent, in his bid for renomination last month. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez is the most prominent of several members of the Democratic Socialists of America who have won primaries for state and local offices this year.

Two other progressives, Jared Polis of Colorado and Ben Jealous of Maryland, also beat challengers last month for the Democratic nomination for governor in those states.

Bill Carrick, a senior campaign adviser to Ms. Feinstein, dismissed the significance of the vote, describing the executive committee as dominated by Sacramento insiders with close ties to Mr. de León from his years as the former Democratic leader of the State Senate.

"She beat him by over 30 points in the primary," Mr. Carrick said. "She won every congressional districts. She won his State Senate district."

The contest is taking place as a new generation of leadership is slowly taking over in California. Mr. Brown is retiring at the end of the year, and Mr. de León had been hoping to ride a wave of generational change.

But he is running in an election year where many voters -- at least statewide -- appear largely satisfied with the way things are going, based on voter surveys, making it more difficult to unseat an incumbent. California's economy is now the fifth largest in the world, and it's humming; the state has added nearly three million jobs since the housing collapse, accounting for more than 15 percent of the country's total job growth in that period. California's unemployment rate, at 4.2 percent in May, is the lowest on record.

The tech boom has brought prosperity to the Bay Area, but it has also contributed to soaring housing costs that have made the region unaffordable for many residents. Meanwhile, the recovery has been far less robust outside of

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California's big cities. In some more rural parts of the state, the unemployment rate still tops 10 percent, and some liberal activists are eager to see the government do more to assist Californians with lower incomes.

Many Democrats say that Mr. de León had done little to capitalize on his strong showing at the party convention in February -- hence his poor showing in the June primary.

Mr. de León, speaking by telephone as he headed for an interview on CNN, said he planned to make the most out of this moment, using it to raise his profile and draw support and financial contributions. He emphasized positions that drew a contrast with the more restrained Ms. Feinstein, including his support for single-payer health care and his call for Mr. Trump's impeachment.

"Last night was a cleareyed call for a new generation of bold leadership in Washington," he said. "We will fight to advance an agenda driven by values and not by power and politics."

Follow Adam Nagourney on Twitter: @adamnagourney.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/us/politics/feinstein-california-democrats.html>

## Graphic

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PHOTOS: Kevin de León was endorsed over Senator Dianne Feinstein. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAE C. HONG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

JOSE LUIS MAGANA/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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